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# ~~(S)~~ The 11 September Hijacker Cell Model

February 2003

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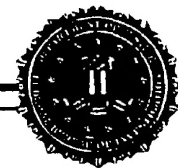
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~~(S)~~ **The 11 September Hijacker Cell Model**  
(U) EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(U) **Key Findings**

~~(S,NF)~~ (U) The 11 September hijackers successfully eluded the notice of US law enforcement and intelligence as they plotted to commandeer and use four airliners as weapons, but details of their lives and activities can be used to detect cells that may follow the 11 September hijackers' model. It should be noted, however, that the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center and the Millennium bombing plot—the previous two major international terrorist operations on US soil—used tactics that are different in key respects from the 11 September model, suggesting that future sleeper cells will use a variety of measures to conceal their activities.

- The 11 September hijackers were all Middle Eastern men between 20 and 33 years of age who wore a western style of dress and grooming.
- The hijackers entered the US legally and used either their true names or variations of their true names. Thirteen of the 19 hijackers traveled to the US in groups of two or three—four or the remaining six were the pilots.
- Once in the country, the hijackers obtained typical US identification—driver licenses, state identification cards, and commercially available documents—likely in order to avoid further use of their passports.
- The hijackers changed residences frequently.
- The hijackers' enrollment at US flight schools was not in itself necessarily uncommon, but their focus during simulation training on learning only the skills that would benefit their mission distinguished them from typical students.
- The hijackers opened bank accounts—often in pairs—with money either they brought legally into the US or wired from overseas.
- The hijackers largely avoided associating with radical Islamic groups in the US, likely in an effort to reduce the chances of detection by law enforcement.
- The hijackers' communications techniques—face-to-face meetings, prepaid phone cards, payphones, cell phones, the Internet, and possibly commercially available mailboxes—made it difficult to trace their operational communications.



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## ~~(S)~~ The 11 September Hijacker Cell Model

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**(S/NF)** Al-Qa'ida leaders and key 11 September plotters such as Usama Bin Ladin, Khalid Shaykh Muhammad (KSM), and Ayman al-Zawahiri probably have derived lessons from the activities and experiences of the 11 September hijackers and may be relying on them to plan future attacks against the US.

- The 11 September plot was at least two years in the making.   An al-Qa'ida operative calling himself "Ubaydah" claimed in a videotaped interview in June 2002 that al-Qa'ida sent a reconnaissance team to the US two years before the 11 September operation. We have no information to confirm that this reconnaissance operation occurred or that it can be tied to the 11 September attacks, but it is consistent with al-Qa'ida tradecraft that calls for long and detailed planning for major operations.
- Al-Qa'ida has lost its camps in Afghanistan where the plot was largely honed and the hijackers were trained, but between 10,000-20,000 potential terrorists trained in the camps and al-Qa'ida's networks in countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia leave it with an ample pool of potential recruits for future attacks.

### **(U)** Snapshot of the Hijackers

**(LES)** Al-Qa'ida's criteria in choosing the 11 September hijackers is unknown, but one of the most important factors probably was their ability to not arouse suspicion from US or foreign intelligence and law enforcement services.

- The hijackers used Western-style clothing and grooming once in the US.
- The hijackers were all Middle Eastern men between 20 and 33 years of age. Many of them spent time in Afghanistan in either late 1999 or 2000, according to a variety of reporting.
- Personal connections and family ties among the hijackers also may have been important; among the 19 were two sets of brothers—Waled and Wa'il al-Shehri and Nawaf and Salim al-Hazmi—and other sub-groupings in which individuals appear to have known each other for years before the plot.

### **(U)** How They Entered the US

**(LES)** The hijackers entered the US legally on valid visas—15 on B1 tourist visas, three on B2 business visas, and one on a F1 student visa—using their true names.

- Thirteen of the 19 hijackers traveled to the US in groups of two or three—the four pilots, Mohamed Atta, Marwan al-Shehhi, Hani Hanjour, and Ziad Jarrah are notable exceptions.

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- The hijackers arrived in the US on eight different airlines: United, Delta, Virgin Atlantic, Swiss Air, Sabena, Ceskoslovenski Air, Condor, and Saudi Airlines. Their flights departed from Brussels, Frankfurt, London, Bangkok, Zurich, Riyadh, Paris, and Prague, and they arrived in Newark, Atlanta, San Diego, Orlando, Miami, Washington-Dulles, New York-JFK, and Los Angeles.
- The four pilots acquired their travel documents—passports from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirate (UAE), and Egypt, and visas issued in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; Dubai, UAE; and Berlin, Germany—between one and five months before entering the US. The other hijackers acquired their documents—Saudi and UAE passports with visas issued mostly in Jeddah and Riyadh—from several months to more than a year before entering the US
- Most of the hijackers reported their previous passports as lost or stolen and received new ones that revealed no travel to Afghanistan—a potential “red flag” that might have invited scrutiny even prior to 11 September.

**(U) Where They Lived and What They Drove**

**(LES) The hijackers' choices for living arrangements and cars were nondescript and likely would not have in themselves raised suspicion.**

- The hijackers usually lived in small groups of two to five and routinely moved between cheap motels and apartments. The pilots maintained relatively stable residence during their flight training, obtaining apartments for approximately six months.
- They owned four older non-descript vehicles: Nawaf al-Hazmi's 1988 Toyota Corolla, Jarrah's 1990 Mitsubishi Eclipse, Waleed al-Shehri's 1993 Dodge Colt and Atta's 1989 Pontiac Gran Prix. The hijackers also rented a variety of vehicles 27 times from several companies, including Enterprise, Budget, and Alamo.

**(U) Identification Used**

**(LES) Many of the hijackers obtained identification cards or driver licenses to use instead of their passports, which would have called attention to them as foreigners.**

- Eight hijackers obtained driver licenses from Arizona, California, and Florida, 16 obtained state identification cards from Florida and Virginia, and seven obtained commercially available ID cards. None had social security numbers.
- At least two hijackers requested duplicate Florida driver licenses, and both Atta and al-Shehhi requested replacement pilot licenses, leaving open the possibility that al-Qa'ida forgers received the originals or duplicates and can try to reproduce these items.



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**(LES) Mohamed Atta in Germany: His Conduct Before Coming to the US**

(LES) As an expatriate in Europe, Atta behaved much like the typical budding jihadist. It was only after he apparently was tapped for his mission—perhaps spotted and selected because of this behavior—and returned from Afghanistan that he began observing strict operational security practices.

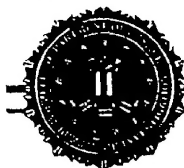
- Prior to early February 2000, Atta and his associates in Hamburg—including 11 September pilots Marwan al-Shehhi and Ziad Jarrah—were known to wear beards and Arab-style dress, attended a mosque known for extremists views, and openly associated with radical figures—all acts that contradict recommendations in al-Qa'ida training manuals not to behave in ways that would attract law enforcement attention.
- After defending his thesis in October 1999, Atta left for Afghanistan and Pakistan in late November and returned to Hamburg in late February 2000, where he no longer appeared to be outwardly radical, according to law enforcement and intelligence reporting. He did not wear a beard or Arab-style dress and generally blended into the Western world. Shortly thereafter, Atta applied for a new passport—apparently both to disguise his travel to Afghanistan and to acquire a new photograph—made inquiries to US flight schools, received a US visa, and spread word to family and friends that he was leaving Germany to continue his education.

**(U) Flight Schools**

(LES) The hijackers enrollment at multiple US flight schools was not in itself uncommon, but their focus on learning only the skills that would benefit their mission—such as Atta and al-Shehhi requesting advanced jet flight training that focused on approaches and turns but not on take-offs and landings—made them stand-out.

- Between June 2000 and September 2001, Atta, al-Shehhi, and Jarrah took flying classes, underwent flight simulator training, and flew test flights in at least eight facilities in Florida and Georgia. Atta and al-Shehhi also visited the Airman Flight School in Oklahoma.
- Hanjour attended three flight schools in Arizona and California between 1996 and 1999. After returning to the US in December 2000, he took jet simulator lessons in Arizona and rented planes from at least five other facilities in Arizona, New Jersey, and Maryland.
- Two other hijackers briefly took introductory flying lessons in San Diego in spring of 2000, but neither sought further flight training.





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**(U) Banking in the US**

**(LES) The hijackers financed their operation with money electronically transferred from overseas as well as with cash and traveler checks they carried—and declared—when they entered the US. They opened US bank accounts and used them legally, but they favored an unusual practice of sharing accounts between unrelated members. None of the hijackers worked to supplement this funding.**

- The hijackers, often in pairs, used 24 bank accounts from branch banks belonging to Sun Trust, Hudson United, First Union, Bank of America, and Dime Savings.
- As the operation drew near, the hijackers closed the majority of their bank accounts and wired most of the remaining money overseas through Western Union stations at bus terminals and grocery stores.

**(U) How They Communicated**

**(LES) The hijackers favored communications techniques designed to make operational discussions difficult to trace.**

- They used pre-paid calling cards combined with payphones to make operational telephone calls to conspirators in the US as well as the Middle East and Germany, according to law enforcement information. They used cell phones to receive operational calls.
- They apparently reserved their most sensitive planning discussions for face-to-face meetings, which likely were held three times in 2001; Germany in January, Spain in July, and Las Vegas in mid-August.
- At least nine hijackers used post office mailboxes from such places as Mail Boxes Etc and Mail Depot, possibly to receive regular mail and to help establish residence.

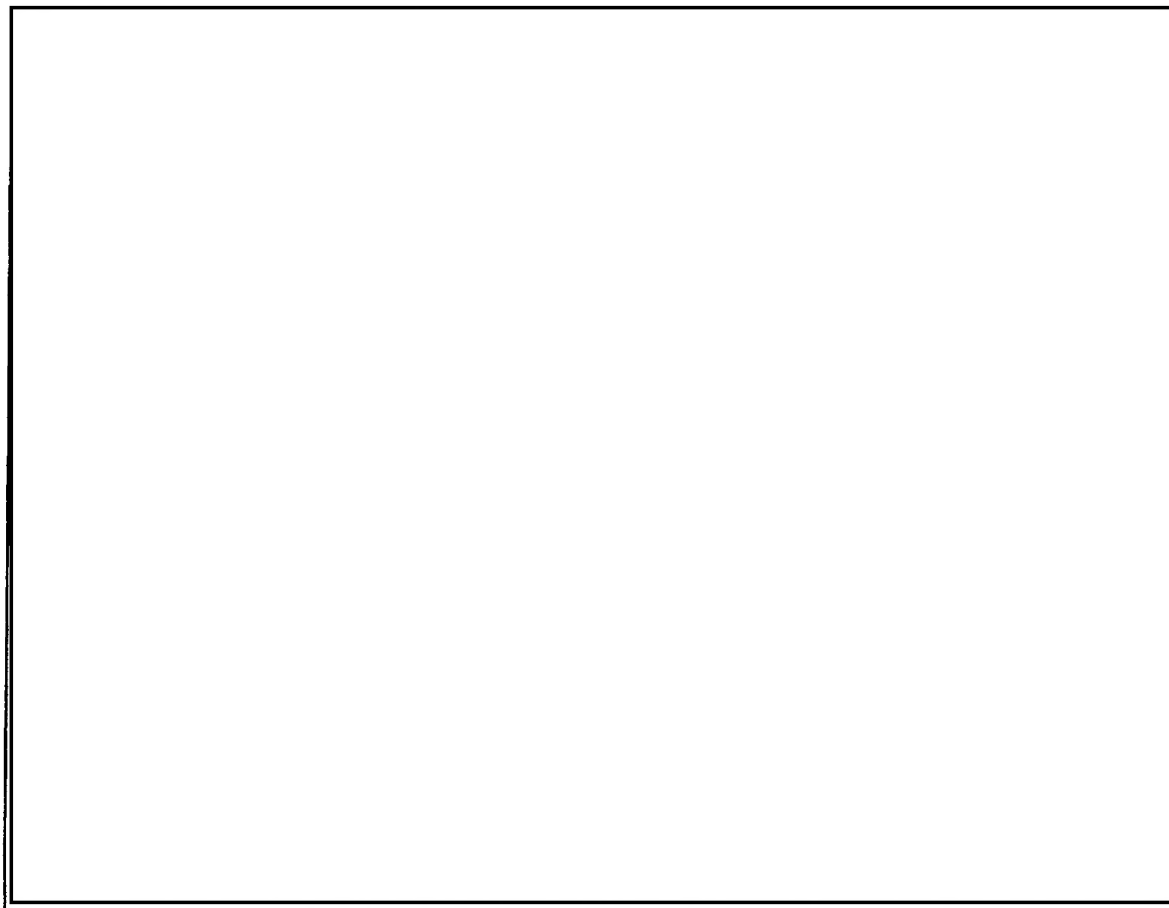
**(U) Businesses They Frequented**

**(LES) Besides rental car businesses and commercially available post office boxes, the hijackers also frequented several other businesses.**

- Many of the hijackers worked out at gyms—possibly to help prepare them for subduing passengers in taking over the airliners.
- They used Kinkos for photocopying unknown materials and for computer rentals.
- Marwan al-Shehhi also visited several bars during his stay in the US and along with Hamza al-Gamdi twice in July 2001 purchased a large amount of pornography—\$250, and \$183 worth—from a Video Outlet store in Florida.



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**(U) Rituals**

**(LES) While the hijackers made a special effort to blend in and conceal their jihadist zeal, this mask cracked in the closing days of their mission.**

- A maid at the Days Inn in Boston where the Flight 175 hijackers stayed the night before the attack reported finding a large amount of body hair in the room, all of the rooms' lotion used—possibly to aid the shaving—and that they had only slept on top of their beds.
- Copies of the same letter were recovered from the hijackers belongings that detailed steps and prayers that were to be followed before the attacks.

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**(LES) Annex A: Ramzi Yousef's and the 11 September Hijackers' Operational Tradecraft**

**(LES) There are some similarities between the 1993 World Trade Center (WTC) bombers led by Ramzi Yousef and the 11 September hijackers, but there also are key differences that make it difficult to establish a single pattern that sleeper cells in the US likely would follow.**

**(LES) Key operational characteristics common to the 1993 and 2001 plotters include:**

- Some of the conspirators from both plots arrived in the US at least six months prior to the attacks—in some cases, more than a year—and members focused their time and energy in preparing for the attacks.
- Some members of each plot used shared bank accounts.
- The key leaders of both plots—Yousef and the 11 September pilots—shared a variety of personal characteristics. They had broad exposure to the West—Yousef and three of the four pilots studied in Western Europe and had technical backgrounds—spoke workable English, were in their 20s or early 30s, and hailed from affluent families.

**(LES) Key operational differences include:**

- Yousef and co-conspirator Mohammed Ajaj traveled together from Pakistan and used false names and documents to enter the US, while all 19 hijackers used their true names, legitimate passports, and secured visas to enter the country.
- Yousef used at least four passports and three different names to enter, operate, and exit the US, while the hijackers acquired legitimate forms of identification, such as driver's licenses and state identification cards in their true name.
- Yousef relied on a local network of childhood friends and individuals introduced to him by others after his arrival in the US to carry out his attack. Most had no significant training and indoctrination, and one conspirator was brought into the plot two weeks before the attack. Conversely, the hijackers relied mainly on experienced, well-trained manpower from abroad and did not bring unknown individuals into their plot after arriving in the US.
- The 1993 conspirators frequently made overseas phone calls from their residences, while the hijackers relied on prepaid cell phones, calling cards, and Internet cafes to communicate abroad. Yousef had a personal computer, but the hijackers are not known to have owned laptop or desktop computers or any electronic data storage media.



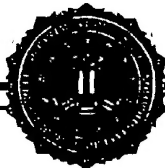


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**(LES) Annex B: Ahmed Ressam and the 11 September Hijackers' Tactics in the US: More Contrasts in Tradecraft**

**(LES) There are few similarities between the Millennium bomber Ahmed Ressam and his plot to attack Los Angeles airport and the 11 September hijackers.**

- Ressam's identification documents—including passports, visas, driver licenses, social security numbers, and credit cards—were all fraudulently obtained in contrast to the 11 September hijackers exclusive use of legitimate documentation.
- Ressam applied for and was granted political asylum in Canada in 1994, inviting increased scrutiny by Canadian immigration authorities. The 11 September plotters sought no special immigration status.
- Although Ressam had lived in Canada since 1994, his English language abilities were poor, probably a result of living in a predominantly Algerian community. The 11 September pilots all spoke workable English.
- In contrast to the 11 September hijackers, neither Ressam nor his associate, Abdelmajid Dahoumane, conducted surveillance or route rehearsals to the US, other than with a map.
- In his debriefings, Ressam has indicated that his cell was instructed to engage in criminal behavior such as credit card fraud and petty theft, to finance their terrorist-related activities; Ressam was arrested for theft four times in only a few years. The 11 September hijackers used legitimate US bank accounts and either legally brought money to the US or had it electronically sent from the Middle East to their accounts.
- Like the 11 September hijackers, Ressam practiced operational security in communicating with his associates, although not as well. Ressam used multiple pre-paid calling cards and several different pay phones, but used a cellular phone to leave messages at the local mosque for associates to meet him there.



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**(U) Annex C: List of Hijackers and Planes**

**American Airlines Flight 11**

Departed Boston—Crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center  
76 passengers and 11 crew

Mohamed Atta  
Satam al-Suqami  
Waled al-Shehri  
Wa'il al-Shehri  
Abdulaziz al-Omari

**United Airlines Flight 175**

Departed Boston—Crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center  
51 passengers and nine crew

Marwan al-Shehhi  
Fayez Banihammad  
Ahmed al-Ghamdi  
Hamza al-Gamdi  
Mohand al-Shehri

**American Airlines Flight 77**

Departed Washington Dulles—Crashed into the Pentagon  
53 passengers and six crew

Hani Hanjour  
Khalid al-Mihdhar  
Majed Moqed  
Nawaf al-Hazmi  
Salem al-Hazmi

**United Airlines Flight 93**

Departed Newark—Crashed near Stony Creek Township, Pennsylvania  
33 passengers and seven crew

Ziad Jarrah  
Saeed al-Ghamdi  
Ahmed al-Haznawi  
Ahmed al-Nami